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A WEAVER ROOST AT HARGEISA, SOMALIA

Sir Geoffrey Archer (Archer & Godman 1961), when writing of the Red-billed Quelea *Quelea quelea* in NW Somalia over the period 1917-1922, stated that he had collected only seven specimens out of the few quite small parties seen, and considered it to be a rare bird. He also thought that as the cultivation of millet increased, so would the number of weavers occurring. In direct contrast however, Ash & Miskell (1983) were able by 1981 to describe it as an abundant non-breeding visitor to NW Somalia.

This note attempts to bridge the gap between these statements by describing very briefly the agricultural changes which took place in the 1940s and 1950s, and to record the discovery of a temporary mixed roost of weavers found at Hargeisa in late July 1958, together with some information on their habits. Finally, a general comment follows on the distribution and numbers of each species compared with the data of Archer & Godman (1961).

To set the occurrence of the weavers into perspective, a note on the agricultural scene is necessary. R.T. Shepherd kindly supplied data showing that 6000 ha were under cultivation, mainly to millet and maize, in ex-British Somaliland in 1947. During 1948-1953 the area was increased to 21 000 ha, after which no figures are available to 1958 (cultivation also increased in ex-Italian Somaliland over the same period from 56 000 ha to 300 000 ha) (data from FAO Production Year Books). In addition to the above large areas of the Hargeisa valley - to name but one locality - were also converted to fields during the years 1954-1958, supplying the habitat for the birds mentioned in this note.

The roost was located on the hillside to the NW of the town on

30 July 1958, when large numbers of weavers were passing eastwards along Hargeisa valley. It was at the site of an underground water reservoir, below which a small fan of comparatively level ground fell away down the hillside, and which was guarded to the west by a small spur. Here grew several patches of scrub, mainly *Acacia etbaica*, 2-3 m in height, together with a clump of acacia saplings some 5-6 m high which formed the principal roosting site. Large flocks of birds had been seen in the area over the previous few days.

The species concerned, and their numbers, are summarized in Table 1 which also shows that the occupation of the roost was terminated within a month. However, some 150-200 Chestnut Weaver *Ploceus rubiginosus* and 200-250 Red-billed Quelea were still in the neighbourhood after 25 August, having moved to an un-located roost to the east.

Table 1. Summary of occupation of a weaver roost at Hargeisa in 1958

Species	Date				
	30 Jul -6 Aug	12 Aug	14 Aug	25 Aug	29 Aug
590 <i>Ploceus galbula</i> Rüppell's Weaver	few				none
591 <i>Ploceus intermedius</i> Masked Weaver	250-300	100	100		none
593 <i>Ploceus rubiginosus</i> Chestnut Weaver	750-1000	500-600	300-400	few	none
595 <i>Ploceus velatus</i> Vitelline Masked Weaver	250-300	100	100		none
597 <i>Quelea quelea</i> Red-billed Quelea	1500-2000	200-250	100		none

Note: The species are keyed to and follow the nomenclature of Ash & Miskell (1983).

During the day the weavers roamed the grainfields to the west, out to approximately 30 km, returning from 17:30 onwards in noisy, weaving, streaming flights of 20-50 birds, continuing to arrive at the roost until well after 18:00. Once in the roost they kept up a continuous chatter, often moving from tree to tree, until it was too dark to see them. The quelea, on the other hand, moved into the roost in parties of 50 or more; the flight being quiet, direct, fast, slightly undulating and at bush-top height. When an obstacle such as a house was encountered, the flock rose high, and was then subject to sudden changes of direction. Once in the roost they quickly and quietly settled down in direct contrast to the *Ploceus* spp.

Contrary to their protracted arrival, the quelea burst out of the roost to the west in three or four large flocks, completely vacating the roost before the sun rose; whereas the weavers, also leaving in three or four large flocks in a matter of minutes, left as the sun rose. Only a few of these lingered on, noisily squabbling as they moved slowly down the hillside towards the town. By 06:10 virtually all had gone.

Predators were observed at the roost on three occasions. On 1 August a Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* burst down between the trees in unsuccessful pursuit of a small flock of Superb Starlings *Spreo superbus* which also used the roost. On 3rd a probable Lanner *Falco biarmicus* flew over at 05:50, and then made off westwards. Finally on the evening of 5th an immature Gabar Goshawk *Melierax gabar* made several attempts to secure a bird from the arriving flocks, but was apparently unsuccessful. It appeared to be baffled by the number of prey available to it.

Species notes

590. *Ploceus galbula* Rüppell's Weaver. This species was commonly seen at Hargeisa, though the coast about Berbera appears to be its stronghold. Also at Medishe near Erigavo. This distribution and frequency generally agrees with that of Archer & Godman (1961), but they do not mention the northeast.

591. *Ploceus intermedius* Masked Weaver. Noted in 1958 from 18 May when 12-15 were seen, the last record being of two on 26 November. In the Forest Reserve at Borama on 20 September, A.R. Tribe and myself found 8-10 nests in various stages of construction suspended above a pool (Clarke 1985). Archer & Godman (1961) considered it "a very rare bird in British Somaliland", there being only three records of which he provided the third - a pair with eggs at Megagwein overlooking the Hargeisa valley.

593. *Ploceus rubiginosus* Chestnut Weaver. First noted in small numbers - maximum 20 - in 1956 when they moved eastwards through Hargeisa between 5-11 May, returning in August and September. Next recorded forming part of a mixed flock of weavers, sparrows and waxbills feeding in fields at Arabsiyo on 23 February 1958. On 23 May in the Forest Reserve at Borama, a flock of 150-200 was feeding on the ground at 07:15 after which the next note concerns the roosting flocks. Many of the males seen in August 1958 were in heavy body moult, suggesting that they had just finished breeding. Archer & Godman (1961) record the collection of one male only, at Hargeisa on 27 August 1920.

595. *Ploceus velatus* Vitelline Masked Weaver. Noted only at Hargeisa where a few were seen on 1 August 1956 feeding in *Acacia etbaica*. Next noted in late July 1958. Archer & Godman (1961) record eight specimens taken from small breeding colonies in mid-June to the end of July, all from east of the Mt Wogr-Odweina line.

597. *Quelea quelea* Red-billed Quelea. First seen at Dabolaq on 29 December 1957; also at Arabsiyo on 23 February 1958, after which the comparatively large flocks of the roost were seen. Archer & Godman

(1961) record the collection of seven specimens from small flocks, all from Hargeisa westwards, and considered the species to be rare.

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GAZETTEER

Arabsiyo	9:41N 43:46E	Hargeisa	9:33N 44:04E
Berbera	10:26N 45:02E	Medishe	10:45N 47:35E
Borama	9:56N 43:11E	Megagwein	9:30N 44:10E approx.
Dabolaq	9:31N 43:52E	Odweina	9:24N 45:04E
Erigavo	10:37N 47:22E	Wogr, Mt	10:01N 45:26E

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BIRDS VISITING A RECENTLY FILLED DAM IN TANZANIA

In 1944 a small catchment area on the Ar dai Plains, 32 km SW of Arusha, Northern Tanzania, was dammed with an earth dam. The reservoir behind the dam did not flood until March 1946, after heavy rain on the night 18/19 March, when, by the next morning, the dam was more than half full. The main rains which followed were very poor, only another 100 mm being recorded, and while the dam filled almost to the spillway, the water level gradually fell through May, and receded rapidly in June. It was estimated that, when the dam was at its fullest, the water area was approximately 1 ha. The nearest permanent water to the Ar dai dam was the large Meserani dam, 14 km to the SE. The Eluanata dam, 4.5 km to the NW was almost dry at the time.

At 10:00 on the next morning, 19 March, there were already three species of waterfowl and two species of wader at the dam. Four other visits were made to the dam in March, April, May and June and the species present on all occasions are shown in Table 1. Unfortunately no visits were possible after June, but the dam would have been dry by the end of July, if not earlier.